BEFORE THE

DEPARTMENT OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND ENERGY

D.T.E. 06-33

In the Matter of:

Investigation by the Department of Telecommunications and Energy on its own motion to develop a long term plan for funding Enhanced 911 services.

COMMENTS OF
THE MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNICATIONS SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

I. Introduction

The Department invited public comment on the "Future of 911" in Massachusetts. Accordingly, on behalf of actual operators of Massachusetts 911 Centers (called Public Safety Answering Points or PSAPs), the Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association herein submits comments on Docket 06-33.

The Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association is a non-profit, voluntary association of PSAP and related emergency services dispatch center supervisors and dispatch center staff from approximately 60 Massachusetts municipalities and other governmental entities. Among the principal aims of the Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association are: (i) promoting the training, equipping, and professional status of call takers and dispatchers ; (ii) assisting its membership with management and best practices development in 911 Center operations; and (iii) working in partnership with the SETB and other organizations, through research and planning, to assist in the ongoing development of the Massachusetts 911 Program.

II. 911 is a Paramount Service

Reliable, efficient, informed, and speedy response to life-threatening emergencies of the citizenry is – with little doubt - the most important function of government – particularly local government - in Massachusetts. The 911 System plays a central role in emergency response as it represents its initial and controlling component: the receipt, processing and servicing of requests for emergency services. By definition, all 3+ million of the state's yearly emergencies – plus millions of other lesser incidents - are reported to and handled by 911 PSAP personnel. In addition, in the post 9/11 era, PSAP's are at the very heart of the initial response to, and management of, terrorist, hazardous materials, or Weapons of Mass Destruction events. It is hard to overstate the fundamental importance of PSAPs to the everyday life of our communities or to our future. Thus any plans for the future of the 911 System must be developed with a full recognition of its fundamental importance to the well-being of the citizenry.

911 is to be distinguished from many other services of government because of its importance. In particular, the 911 System must be structured, funded, staffed, managed, maintained, and continually evolved to be the best that a modern, democratic government and current technology can deliver to its citizens, with cost a secondary consideration.

Further, MCSA believes that any future 911 System be constructed with objective performance goals and measures as an integral part so that policy and resources can be adjusted to always insure that those goals are being met. In this way, 911 callers can be assured of the necessarily quality of this critical service when they so desperately need it. As one example, current 911 regulations have required (for many years) that all (wireline) 911 calls be answered within 10 seconds 95% of the time (560 CMR 2.0). This is a laudable goal. Unfortunately, no system has collected data on whether this very important goal is met, no 911 Center (Public Safety Answering Position or PSAP) knows whether it is meeting these goals, and neither callers nor government policy makers are assured that the 911 System is delivering the results that the rules mandate. Even worse, if PSAPs were to fail, even miserably, to meet these standards, no signal is raised and no

alarm sounded. They may not even be aware of these failures to deliver prompt 911 call answering service and thus armed with the knowledge that is first required to increase a particular shifts staffing, change operating procedures, or make other necessary improvements. This is an unfortunate situation that can be rectified in any future 911 System if attention to performance monitoring is built into the system design.

III. 911 is More than Technology and Telephony

A modern 911 System is composed of various components including technological systems for receiving emergency calls and signals; systems of governance and control to ensure that 911 System policy and procedures are fair and optimal; experienced and skilled telecommunicators who answer and process 911 calls according to best practices; and the equipment and tools that telecommunicators use to answer and process 911 calls.

The MCSA believes that the Massachusetts 911 Program must evolve to support all of the components of a 911 System, not just some components. 911 is not just technology, nor is it just telephony, nor is it any other single component such as the skills of telecommunicators who answer 911 calls. Looking at it from the perspective of a 911 caller (or a wireline telephone customer who is supporting 911 by paying a monthly surcharge on their phone bill), they are concerned not only with their emergency call connecting reliably through the proper circuits, but also with the prompt, expert and caring help they receive from their 911 Telecommunicator and the critical knowledge that is passed from these telecommunicators to responding emergency police, fire, and medical units.

In Massachusetts, unlike in many other states, the wireline 911 program has been constrained by its current (and predecessor) legislation to the reimbursement of telecommunications carriers for 911 systems and services[1]. The MCSA believes that this

[1] MGL Chapter 6A, Section 18H (inserted by Chapter 239 of the Acts of 2002) states in part "The department of telecommunications and energy shall promulgate rules providing for the recovery by

carrier-technology-oriented 911 program focus was, at least partly, a natural result of the unique-to-Massachusetts original 411-based funding source for E911 beginning in the 1990's, when 411 surcharge revenues for E911 were relatively small and not even sufficient to fund E911 telephony and related disability access programs. Limited resources meant a program of necessarily delimited scope in the early days. While the resources of the program expanded dramatically after 2002 (when the monthly surcharge replaced the 411 surcharge), the basic scope of the program has remained the same.

The MCSA asserts that the 911 System is not the exclusive province of telecommunications carriers, rather, the 911-related services provided by telecommunications carriers are just one set of the components of a total 911 System. The MCSA believes that it is very much in the interests of wireline telephone customers (and others who both depend on and pay for any future 911 program) to broaden the scope of future legislation so that PSAPs would be included in the entities authorized to receive support from the 911 program. The Massachusetts Wireless 911 Program recognizes and supports this broader scope for 911 by funding not only technology but the personnel costs (including salaries) of wireless 911 dispatchers. Many other states also support a wide-range of PSAP 911-related expenses by funding critical call processing equipment and job aides, needed communications equipment, regular training, and many other components of PSAP costs.

IV. Increase Focus on Training and Certification of 911 Telecommunicators

Few components of a 911 System are as important as having skilled and experienced persons answer and process 911 calls. The MCSA strongly supports the SETB's recently adopted proposal (originated and advanced by the Major City Police Chiefs organization) for the establishment of a PSAP Training Fund to dedicate 5% of wireline and wireless surcharge monies to the pre and in-service training needs of 911 Telecommunicators. Under this innovative program, PSAPs would receive yearly grants

---

telecommunications companies of expenses that have been, are, or will be, until December 31, 2007, incurred that are associated with the services [*of the 911 program*]…"

to allow them to build and continually develop the skills of 911 Telecommunicators in many areas, as approved by the SETB. An MCSA study of PSAP 911 Telecommunicators (a general term for persons who staff PSAPs and are variously titled as public safety dispatchers, emergency telecommunications dispatchers, police or fire dispatchers, fire alarm operators, or 911 telecommunications) in January of 2003 found that the state had 1547 full time non-sworn 911 Telecommunicators, 593 part-time non-sworn 911 Telecommunicators, 179 Communications Supervisors (most all of whom also perform 911 Telecommunicator functions as working supervisors), 272 sworn police officers or firefighters who always perform 911 Telecommunicator functions, and a number of sworn personnel who occasionally perform 911 Telecommunicator functions (either as fill-in or on a rotating basis among other patrol or station duties). These persons work in 270+ Massachusetts PSAPs (mostly located in police stations).

Many of these personnel have had little or no pre or in-service training of any kind over a period of many years. The training that is available is typically taken by 911 Telecommunicator on their own time for no pay. Very few 911 Telecommunicator are able to afford this, thus attendance is minimal. In cases where training is able to be provided by the PSAP employer, it often is restricted to the basic skills of CPR and first aid re-certification. A relatively few PSAPs are able to send their new hires to the 5-week SETB-sponsored Dispatch Academy, but many PSAPs simply cannot afford this otherwise excellent training opportunity.

Examples of 911 Telecommunicator skills that must be developed include: the ability to handle suicidal callers, the ability to properly question callers about domestic violence events; the use of Emergency Medical Dispatch cards to give life-saving instructions; the techniques needed to handle calls from children; managing a hostage or barricaded suspect situation where the 911 Telecommunicator is talking with the hostage-taker (or a victim surreptitiously using a cell-phone); coordinating mutual-aid for a mass casualty event involving dozens of 911 calls; understanding and using communications interoperability; operating 911 TTD devices; using on-call language interpretation services for 911 callers; handling emergency calls from accident reporting systems like

Onstar, activating the town Emergency Operations Center; understanding liability issues in police 911 call taking; managing 911 Telecommunicator stress; understanding the complex legal issues involved in properly handling 911 calls from unnamed informants, dealing with the mentally ill caller, etc.

The principal reason for the failure of PSAPs to provide in-service training to their 911 Operators is cost. Typically and regrettably, a work shift in any PSAP is staffed at the margin; in other words, all 911 Telecommunicator scheduled for a shift are required to be in their seats answering and processing 911 calls (excluding time for meal and rest breaks). Almost no PSAPs are able to build a training relief factor into their regular work schedule; the few that are able to properly structure staffing to include provision for training, typically find that their intended training relief factor must be used to staff regular shifts owing to chronic personnel turnover or unexpected long-term absences (illness, maternity leave, disability, military leave, etc.).

Thus, to send a 911 Telecommunicator to in-service training requires that another 911 Telecommunicator be hired to replace the Telecommunicator in training (usually on overtime at 1.5 times the hourly rate of pay). Unfortunately, municipalities cannot afford the cost of overtime relief and simply are not able to free up 911 Telecommunicator for in-service training.

Accordingly, MCSA recommends a support program for In-Service Training of 911 Telecommunicators be included as part of the 911 Program and funded out of any surcharge. The stipend would fund the personnel costs of 911 Telecommunicators to attend specific SETB-approved training courses targeted at improving key skills and knowledge. The SETB would establish broad rules and procedures for the Program and would insure oversight of the quality and type of training courses that would be approved, although local PSAPs would be responsible for the specific direction of the training for their own PSAP employees.

V. Integrate Wireline and Wireless 911 Programs and Share Costs Fairly

MCSA recommends that the future 911 System consider integration under one technical architecture, one statutory framework, and one approach to funding based on a monthly surcharge that would be applied to all technologies. Thus, wireline, wireless, and any future technologies that deliver 911 calls or signals to a PSAP would all be treated as a part of a broader 911 System. In addition, MCSA proposes that there be more parity in how the costs of 911 are distributed among customers using different technologies. It does not seem fair, for example, that 911 cell customers pay only $0.30/month for 911 service whereas residential customers of traditional wireline carriers pay $0.85/month whereas VoIP and other non-traditional customers pay varying amounts (or nothing at all). Costs should be distributed fairly yet each technical sector must contribute to a full-featured 911 program.

VI. One Size Does Not Fit All

MCSA believes the current 911 Program operates in a mode where all PSAPs, with the exception of Boston, are managed under the same general set of operating conditions, equipment configurations, and rules. For example, the major variations in equipment configurations that PSAPs receive from the current 911 Program are simply a matter of a few more - or a few less - operator positions, otherwise everything is relatively the same[2]. The MCSA proposes a more flexible approach where there may be 3-5 gradations of equipment and other configurations that would be appropriate to the differential needs of different sized or differently configured PSAPs.

VII. PBX Systems Should Pass ALI to PSAPs

MCSA believes that the future 911 Program should include provisions to require larger Private Branch Exchange (PBX) telephone systems, particularly those that support

[2] This is not quite true as a few of the largest PSAPs, including Boston, are currently eligible for special customer premise system equipment that is based on Automatic Call Director (ACD) gear more capable of supporting the high call demands of larger centers; but the point is relevant nevertheless.

phones in more than one building, to report the locations of all PBX extension phones when persons using PBX-connected phones call 911. Currently, a large business, university, or even government agency that operates a large-scale PBX in Massachusetts makes their own decision about whether to include this vital function in the PBX feature-set upon its installation. Many PBS operators do include "PS-ALI" functionality; but many more do not. There are PBXs with over 20,000 connected phones in over a hundred buildings that (falsely) report the location of any 911 call made from any phone as coming from a single room in one of those buildings (the room that houses the PBX itself!). This is a disservice to users of those PBXs when they need to make that all-important 911 call and cannot clearly communicate their location to the 911 Telecommunicator. MCSA is not calling for a wholesale, immediate change-out of all PBX systems that do not pass ALI; rather we are calling for a policy and timetable that will gradually insure that PBX systems, as they are installed or upgraded, include this 911 ALI-reporting feature.

VIII. Thoughtfully Encourage Regional PSAPs According to Local Needs

Some think Massachusetts has too many PSAPs (over 270 primary PSAPs in 2006). Others are not so sure, believing that 911 is an important local function that is properly embedded in the only form of local government that exists in much of our state, namely town government. The advocates of regionalization cite operating efficiencies, capital and other cost savings, career development (of telecommunicators), coordination of emergency resources, and other factors as benefits of regional centers. Others claim that only local government can be responsible and accountable for the delivery of 911 services that can best be provided locally by persons who intimately know the geography, service needs, and culture of a town. MCSA believes there is merit in both claims and makes the following suggestion: that the future 911 System build in a component that appropriately encourages, but does not mandate, regionalism. Connecticut's 911 Program offers an example that Massachusetts would be well advised to consider; they provide delimited subsidy for both the planning and operation of PSAPs that serve 3 or more towns. Voluntary coalitions of neighboring towns should be able to approach the 911

Program for planning funds to investigate and plan the many aspects of a regional center (governance, operating and personnel policies, equipment, maintenance and support, cost-sharing of operating and capital programs, etc.). Then, once operational to certain standards, they might be able to receive a partial subsidy of yearly operating costs at a level that would fit within the overall 911 System budget. In this way, PSAP regionalism is promoted but allowed to grow in ways that are guided by cooperating local governments.

MCSA warns of false economies in how one thinks about the number of PSAPs in a state. In New Hampshire there has recently been one (1) statewide PSAP operated by a state agency. This is sometimes cited as a model of extreme efficiency; but the claim is quite misleading. In fact, New Hampshire has 1 PSAP but approximately 100 other centers that receive the transferred calls of 911 callers from the statewide PSAP, further converse with the caller, and provide other call processing and dispatch support for the emergency incidents. Thus, New Hampshire actually has 101 total centers that handle 911 call emergencies for a population of approximately 1,300,000 persons. This is a "rate" of one "911 Center" for every 13,000 persons. In Massachusetts, with 270 Primary PSAPs (most of whom also provide complete call processing and dispatch services), approximately 75 Secondary PSAPs (mostly fire alarm or fire dispatch offices), and a population of about 6,400,000 persons, we have a rate of one "911 Center" for every 18,500 persons – or fewer 911 Centers for our population. And because many of our PSAPs offer total "one-stop shopping" for 911 service: the whole emergency incident from beginning to end is handled by one center with local knowledge and full coordination of all responder agencies, some believe a higher level of service is provided to callers.

Respectfully submitted,

Massachusetts Communications Supervisors Association

BY: _____

Anne Marie Cullen, President
MCSA
C/o Hamilton-Wenhan Emergency Center
265 Bay Street
Hamilton, Massachusetts 01982
(978) 468-4421 FAX: (978) 468-1919
acullen@hamiltonma.gov

BY: _____

George Fosque
MCSA Vice President
C/o Cambridge Emergency Communications
489 Broadway
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
(617) 349-6911; FAX (617) 349-6918
gfosque@cambridge911.org